

Mixed Picture

Are higher-density developments being shortchanged by opinion surveys?

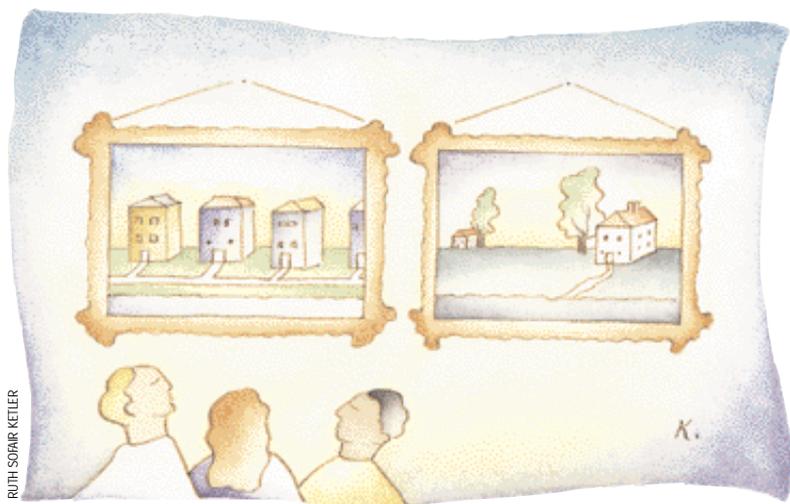
Smart growth proposals advocating higher-density development, better use of existing infrastructure, greater reliance on public transportation, and more open space are popping up across the country in cities big and small. Despite the new appreciation of growing smarter, however, one basic question remains: How do consumers feel about

The findings reveal what many policy makers do not realize: Traditional statistical surveys are blunt and inaccurate instruments for capturing consumer attitudes toward density. Since most such surveys fail to provide specific definitions for concepts such as residential density and lot size, responses to these surveys depend on personal interpretations of the words used in the questionnaire. Without a specific definition to rely on, consumer responses are ultimately influenced by the negative connotations traditionally associated with the word “density.”

But, as the cliché “A picture is worth a thousand words” implies, visual surveys provide a more complete idea of what respondents like. UNC’s research indicates that when visual surveys are used, consumers will accept mixed land uses as long as a human scale is maintained and good design is evident. Visual surveys suggest that people are willing to make trade-offs when it comes to their preferred residential environment and that they generally are attracted to environments that are beautiful, natural, serene, and safe—independent of the neighborhood’s density. They like well-designed houses, nice streetscapes, and landscaping that features walks and paths and that hides parking areas.

How do visual surveys work, and why do they contradict the opinion surveys? In traditional surveys, participants answer a series of written questions about their residential preferences. In visual surveys, participants view a slide show of images of specific places and residential features; they are asked to rate each slide on a scale of -10 to +10. This format allows respondents to actually see the feature in question—instead of having to rely on their personal interpretation of it—and to rate exactly what they do and do not like. More important, visual surveys enable the respondent to judge several features in combination rather than separately.

Density is a complex concept. What one person considers a high-density neighborhood may or may not qualify as high density to another person—thus the subjective element inherent in traditional surveys. UNC’s review of survey results finds that the simple statement that Americans prefer low-density development is too simple to be accurate. The results indicate that, done well, higher-density development with a mix of housing types receives higher marks. Consumers and voters are indeed open to alternatives to traditional single-family tract development, and this bodes well for the future of the nation’s large metropolitan areas. ■



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managing growth in this manner? Will they buy homes in smart growth-inspired, higher-density developments, or will they continue to prefer the conventional low-density, cul-de-sac suburban neighborhood?

At the request of the National Multi Housing Council, researchers at the University of North Carolina (UNC) recently addressed that question. The research showed that when measured by standard opinion, or “statistical,” surveys, the majority of consumers prefer single-family detached housing. But when more appropriate “visual surveys” were used, consumers preferred higher-density development combining smaller lots, smaller homes, mixed housing types, accessible parks and open space, narrower streets with sidewalks, and commercial development within walking distance.

The fact that results obtained by standard opinion surveys and visual surveys contradict one another is a critical issue, given that standard opinion survey results often are used by smart growth opponents to “prove” that growth management policies ignore consumer preferences. Because consumers also vote, opinion survey results often are enough to discourage local officials from seriously considering clustered, higher-density development.

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The full report, “Consumer Preferences for Residential Development Alternatives” (Working Paper 2000.02) is available for \$7 from the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of North Carolina (919-962-3074).